NEWS

Towards a Social-Relational Model of Digital Disability Classification | Data & Society: Points

By Georgia van Toorn

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It starts with a tick box on a form. To assess the potential risk to vulnerable people, my university ethics committee asks whether a research project involves "people with a cognitive impairment, physical impairment, an intellectual disability, or a mental illness." This category appears alongside those classifying several other types of "risky" bodies, including "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," "women who are pregnant," and "people highly dependent on medical care." I place an x in the appropriate box, and, with one click, distill a vast universe of information, experiences, and subjectivities into a single data point, a single administrative category: disability. In doing so, I perform important boundary work, distinguishing bodies that demand extra attention, care, and scrutiny, from those that are of no special ethical or bureaucratic significance.

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